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AUTHOR Dickey, Frank G.
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ABSTRACT

If one is to understand fully the reasons for recognizing and monitoring the professional and specialized accrediting agencies, a discussion of the history of accreditation is desirable. This report provides that information and discusses the current role of the National Commission on Accrediting. The author explains that the Commission has endeavored in recent years to achieve a wider understanding of the role that institutions, the professions, the States, and the Federal Government play in relation to the governance of American higher education. Under this philosophy, the commission has attempted to keep the interests of the institutions, the regional associations, and the professions in balance. (JF)

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RECOGNIZING AND MONITORING PROFESSIONAL AND SPECIALIZED ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS

Frank G. Dickey, Executive Director
National Commission on Accrediting

If one is to understand fully the reasons for recognizing and monitoring the professional and specialized accrediting agencies, a bit of historical information seems desirable.

Immediately following World War II a rash of activity developed in the accreditation field. Institutions of higher education found themselves beset with many new and sometimes questionable organizations seeking to accredit specialized programs on their campuses. The administrative officers of these institutions concluded that something had to be done; otherwise, their institutions would be pulled and tugged in a hundred different directions by these accrediting organizations with their varied and different standards and procedures. Consequently, the National Commission on Accrediting was established in 1949 to seek ways to deal with these problems.

The National Commission on Accrediting is made up of member colleges and universities (approximately 1,300 institutions currently hold membership). The Board of Commissioners is composed of presidents of institutions of higher education named by the six constituent institutional membership organizations (AAC, AACJC, AASCU, AAU, AUU, and NASULGC). In addition, representatives from the public sector, the AGB, and the FRACHE are included.

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The dilemma for American colleges between specialized or professional accreditation and general or institutional accreditation was characterized by a representative of the National Commission on Accrediting in this way. "One may view a university as an arrangement for expediting administration of autonomous faculties, or it may be viewed as an institution that has purposes and values greater than the sum of its parts. Under the first view, we shall have segmental accrediting. Under the second, we shall have institution-wide accrediting. Who is to decide what a university is?"

In 1952, the Commission attempted to decide the answer to this question. It resolved "to have those agencies which now deal with segments of higher education serve in an advisory capacity to the regional associations, and reduce or eliminate their direct accrediting relationships with the colleges and universities." It voted that, except at its discretion, professional agencies should make no more charges for accreditation after January, 1954, and that unless the Commission approved, they should obtain information about institutions only through the regional associations. The Commission recommended that until arrangements could be devised for the transfer of professional accreditation to the regional associations, its member institutions should continue to deal with professional accrediting agencies in fields influenced by state licensure--such as architecture, engineering, law, and the health professions. But it advised seven professional agencies--in business, chemistry, forestry, journalism, librarianship, social work, and teacher

education--to stop accreditation and to work instead with the regional associations; and it requested its member colleges and universities to stop dealing with these seven agencies with respect to accreditation.

It is safe to say that no other action of the Commission before or since has raised so much conflict. By its decision the Commission was attempting to bring order into accreditation; yet like the vigilantes of the early western mining camps, it lacked the mandate of law and, at least to the accrediting agencies, the aura of legitimacy.

Faced with the Commission's ruling, most professional agencies were willing to visit institutions in coordination with the regional associations, but they maintained their right to grant separate accreditation to professional schools and professional programs. For their part, the regional associations had agreed through their National Committee of Regional Accrediting Agencies to develop arrangements for the coordination of accrediting activities in fields closely related to the liberal arts. However, not all of them were prepared to be assigned these accrediting activities by the Commission.

The success of the Commission's move was to hinge primarily on the support of its member colleges and universities. In joining the Commission, they had agreed to consult with it before taking action contrary to its rulings. Now many institutions were unsure about severing relations with the agencies; some notified the Commission of their intent to continue these relations; and several considered

withdrawing their support from the Commission. "If enough colleges and universities do not like, or do not comply, with our recommendations, the Commission will have to change its program," one Commission representative observed. "It looks to me," he warned, "that we may have stepped too far."

The reason for his concern soon became apparent. Although the Commission undoubtedly represented the views of many presidents that professional accreditation should be abolished, these views were not shared by many professors. Unlike administrators, faculty members did not view all professional accrediting agencies as interloping organizations, interfering in educational decisions. Indeed, many deans and professors were themselves members of the professional organizations, and in a number of the agencies, they determined accrediting policy. Hence, at one of the most influential public universities, a faculty committee recommended to the president that the university oppose the Commission's recommendation. "The Committee believes that, on the whole, society and the interests of institutions are better served by the present scheme than by the one proposed by the Commission," it stated. "The cure for the allegedly sick child is not the administration of a lethal dose of medicine."

In addition to this resistance among its own member institutions the Commission faced two further setbacks. It had expected that the United States Office of Education could assign its own activities of recognizing accrediting agencies over to the Commission, but in 1952 under Public Law 82-550, the Commissioner of Education was directed to publish a list of accrediting agencies. The subsequent list included all of the

professional agencies of concern to the National Commission. Finally, the National Commission had hoped for a sizable foundation grant to enable the regional associations to assume their newly prescribed responsibilities, but funds for this effort were not forthcoming. Thus two months before the deadline of January, 1954, the executive committee of the Commission announced the abandonment of its previous order.

The Commission would henceforth continue to place major responsibility for accreditation on the regional associations, but it would not expect them to supervisethe professional agencies nor to assume the latter's accrediting functions. Instead it would expect all agencies to improve and coordinate their own activities. "Up to now," stated the Commission's first executive secretary, Fred O. Pinkham, "the Commission has stood against abuses in accrediting. It must continue to do so. But it must also now stand for good accrediting." His successor, William K. Selden, agreed that the Commission must take a new tack. "Accrediting is so woven into the social fabric of higher education that its eradication is an impossibility," he averred. "The responsibility of the National Commission on Accrediting is to fill a place of leadership by formulating sound principles for accrediting and by serving as a guide and friendly counselor for all the diverse and numberous groups interested in accreditation."

Even though the professional agencies had not agreed to fold their tents and refrain from accreditation during these early years, the Commission had made progress in several other ways. It had held meetings

and negotiations with all of the accrediting agencies and numerous other organizations and had vividly alerted them to the concerns of college and university educators. It had attracted national attention to problems in accreditation. It had also helped to stimulate the coordination of visits of professional and regional adsociations.

Once the issue of professional accreditation had been settled, the next major question the National Commission faced was that of professional accreditation in teacher education. For a while, the possibility existed that this question would wreck the Commission; but in 1956, after numerous conferences and extensive negotiations, it finally agreed that accreditation of teacher education was socially desirable. Upon securing certain changes in the structure of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, it then granted recognition for accreditation in this field. In the same year, the Commission began publishing an annual list of agencies that it recognized for accreditation, a list limited initially to the six regional associations and professional agencies in nineteen fields. A year later it at last adopted formal criteria for the recognition of accrediting agencies. These criteria have been revised on three occasions since then.

Looking at the Commission's achievements since that period, three major types of activity should be noted. First, the Commission has attempted to reach consensus for American higher education on a rationale or philosophy of accreditation. Second, it has become a center of communication and regulation of accreditation. And third, it has endeavored to stimulate improvement of accreditation.

The conflict over professional versus regional accreditation revealed that within American Higher education, the general significance of accreditation was not well understood. Created out of concern for institutional autonomy and the danger of restrictive standardization, the Commission later realized that colleges and universities are free neither to dispense with standards nor to determine unilaterally their own standards. As a result of this realization, the Commission has endeavored in recent years to achieve a wider understanding of the role that institutions, the professions, the states, and the federal government play in relation to the governance of American higher education.

Under this philosophy, the Commission has attempted to keep the interests of the institutions, the regional associations, and the professions in balance. In this effort, it has worked with each of the professions to assure that both educators and practitioners within the profession share responsibility in accreditation. Most significantly, it has tried to reach its decisions in terms not alone of the desires of educational institutions or the professions, but of the needs of the public at large. Hence in recognizing any accrediting agency, it has adopted as its first requirement the principle of "social need"--the legitimate need of students, parents, employers, faculty members, government agencies, and other groups for information and guidance about institutional quality.

Occasionally, as a result of this philosophy, the Commission has been subject to the criticism that it weighs more heavily the interests of accrediting agencies than those of its institutional members. It is true, as the history of the regulatory agencies of the federal government shows, that any regulatory body, including the Commission, may in time tend to represent the interests of those it was created to regulate. But the Commission continues to deem of first importance the welfare of the public and of higher education; and support for this policy seems evident from the growth of its membership to more than thirteen hundred colleges and universities--the largest number of institutional members of any higher education association in the United States.

A second major accomplishment of the Commission has been to act as a center for information, coordination, and mediation in accrediting. Much of the antagonism, conflict, and tension over accreditation has arisen from misinformation and misunderstanding. In the past, facts about accrediting agencies and their accrediting policies were difficult to obtain, while rumor, often false, was widespread. At the same time, without sufficient consultation and publicity, accrediting agencies sometimes formulated unwise plans. Hence the Commission has sought to provide authoritative information and to undertake counseling and guidance to resolve and to prevent conflicts over accreditation.

Even if all its other aims were fulfilled, and the Commission had concluded that its task was done, the need for this function would continue. As one state education official has said, "There must be a

national board of some sort which can work with the various accrediting groups, institutions, the professions, and states in order that all can work together in harmony and plan in unity."

When friction over accreditation has developed, the Commission has attempted to provide lubrication, and it has found that cooperation is often best obtained without publicity. "On occasions the authority of the Commission will have to be demonstrated when an individual organization may be carried away by a misguided and inflated attitude of its own independence and importance," Selden has commented. " "Fortunately the mere presence of this potential, correctional force is now usually sufficent so that public chastisement is not required."

It can perhaps be noted without too much fanfare that the Commission has helped to unify accreditation in nursing and in religious education; it has succeeded in arranging at least a temporary division of labor in music education. By its mere presence, it has tended to discourage the development of unnecessary accreditation; and so far it has actively helped discourage accrediting in such fields as accounting, bacteriology, history, English composition and communication, food technology, college health services, industrial design, marriage counseling, personnel and guidance services, recreation and theater arts. In addition, the Commission has held protracted negotiations with several other organizations, ranging from the Agricultural Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture to the American Association of University Women and the New England Junior College Council, which have since ended their accrediting activities.

During the past eight years forty-one different organizations have presented applications for recognition to the National Commission on Accrediting for its consideration and hopeful approval. Acting in behalf of the institutions and the general publics good, the Commission has given recognition to only seven of these requests.

Finally, the Commission has sought to encourage improvements in accreditation in order to meet the issue posed by its executive director in 1958: "The National Commission on Accrediting must be prepared with conviction and proof to defend the policies and practices being pursued in accrediting as sound, constructive and enlightened, or must give leadership in developing accrediting procedures that are entirely defensible. If such leadership is not provided, a crisis could readily and quickly develop." Some outside observers see this crisis as already acute, with public rejection of accreditation the likely result. One of them, an educational official in Washington, says simply that the National Commission must "give the accrediting process itself a better aroma than it now enjoys."

The major problem still facing the Commission, however, is the fact that accreditation can easily slip from being a stimulating influence to becoming merely an academic ritual or a deadening pressure on education. As has been said, for example, about professional accreditation: "Accrediting improperly conducted could support professional conservatism, rigidity, and selfishness. It could prevent the introduction of new methods and it could indirectly place limits on enrollments. In contrast,

accreditation properly conducted can and does provide, even with all its limitations and inadequacies, a protection for the public and an assurance to the profession. It can and does offer stimulation for continued educational improvement and it can and does indicate, sometimes after too much of a social lag, the proper direction for the education of the future members of the profession."

If accreditation in American higher education is to have a desirable influence on educational development and utility for the nation, it must be conducted with the furthest vision of any enterprise in higher education. Professors and administrators must, of course, attempt to foresee the demands that will face their students during the remaining decades of this century. But because the accrediting practices of today will affect professors, administrators, and students a decade or more hence, accrediting agencies must act with an even further perspective. Questions enough have been asked as to whether they have this vision. To maintain the benefits of accreditation for American higher education, the Commission must help assure that they do.